




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR TRAEGER

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WORKING WITH CHILDREN (INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr KATTER** (Traeger—KAP) (6.19 pm), in reply: I rise to close off the debate for the Working with Children (Indigenous Communities) Amendment Bill 2021. I thank all honourable members for their contributions to this bill. I appreciate the demeanour and attitude shown by a lot of the speakers, which was very complimentary to the efforts we have jointly made as a party towards this initiative, and I acknowledge that. I thank the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee for their efforts, but one thing I will not thank them for is their neglect in not visiting more of our first Australian communities. I was really hoping that this time with this bill there would be a good tour of Cape York. It is a place I do not get to very often and I am sure not many of us do. There are more Aboriginal communities up there than I have in my electorate. I think that would have given a really deep insight into the impact of this legislation. Just going to Palm Island, Mount Isa and Yarrabah is not covering it. This does not do it justice at all. That was very disappointing, I must say from the outset.

I would like to thank everyone who has had the courage to talk to someone outside of government. It has become a rare thing these days. People get scared to talk to you if you are not a part of government and the community groups, but they rose above that and expressed their opinions and views despite that and I want to make mention of them: Waanyi Tribal PBC; Cloncurry Justice Association; North Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services, led by the famous Father Mick in Mount Isa; selectability in Mount Isa; Palm Island Community Company; Palm Island Community Justice Group; the mayor of Palm Island, Mislam Sam; Yarrabah Leaders' Forum; Yarrabah Aboriginal Shire Council; North Queensland Regional Aboriginal Corporation Language Centre; the mayor of Mornington Island, Kyle Yanner; Doomadgee Community Justice Group; the mayor of Doomadgee, Jason Ned, and other members of the Doomadgee council; Junkuri Laka Wellesley Islands Aboriginal Law Justice and Governance Association; Calvin Page; and Grant Garvie. That is not an exhaustive list by any means.

This is the third time I have introduced this bill, or at least a bill in this form based on this principle, in the spirit of the growing sentiment around our state and nation to advance the interests of our first Australians—which I think everyone in this House would strongly agree with—and rectify their on average abysmal socioeconomic conditions, their incarceration rates, their welfare dependency, the violence that is rife in their homes and communities, their poor health outcomes and their life expectancy. I expected much better from this debate. We owe these people a hell of a lot more.

Let me remind you of one of the communities I refer to a lot, Doomadgee, which is one that I am familiar with. They are currently experiencing the impact of floods which has exacerbated a lot of these issues right now. It is a town of about 1,000 people where about 90 per cent or higher identify as first Australians. The unemployment in Doomadgee hovers around 20 per cent. The average household income is \$63,000 versus \$87,000 for the state. It costs about \$600 for a fortnightly trip to the supermarket. What does it cost you? It costs me about \$200 or \$300; it costs them \$600. Try living in that community. The average life expectancy is 49. The crime rate is about 10 times that of Brisbane.

A domestic violence breach occurs every day. A person is assaulted almost every day. A home is broken into every three days, and of course that is just the crimes the police know about. Unfortunately, there is a lot that we do not know about that goes on inside homes that is unreported.

Life in Doomadgee is not that easy. Despite that hardship, hope still exists. Quite surprisingly, hope for these people still exists. While the members who have spoken on the bill and provided input into the committee report have empathised with the bill and its intent—and as I said, I appreciate that—none of them acknowledged this hope and none of them have risen to the challenge that was asked of them by the Palm Island mayor, Mislam Sam, who said—and they are powerful words—

I think one thing I will say from the get-go is this community needs a brave state government. Our welfare snowball continues to grow by the day. Every year we have 50 funerals. There are probably two weeks in the calendar year where we do not have a funeral on the island. I have one of the busiest cemeteries and busiest airports. Do you see the correlation? All the people are flying in and out of my community because locals cannot hold down simple local jobs because they cannot access a blue card.

I will put it in the words of Kyle Yanner, the mayor of Mornington Island, who struggled to get a blue card when he became mayor. His community voted for him to be their mayor, but he could not get a blue card. He has it now. He said—

The blue card has failed us, like most other systems in communities. They are not fit for purpose in our communities. At the end of the day, not just individuals but the whole community loses. We also lose. We sometimes get employees, young families from cities like Brisbane or Cairns, who want to come and work here, who want to come and help us, who want to come and make a difference and help us change the struggles that we face, but we lose them mainly because our preschool is normally understaffed. It is not running efficiently because our mob cannot get blue cards to work in this place. It is hard to get family orientated people across to our island to work in the preschool also. Not only do we lose with that; we have young families who lose also. They want to get ahead. They want to build a better life but they cannot because our blue card system restrains our other mob being able to work there to cater for these families who have young families.

Finally, I will refer to the words of the mayor of Yarrabah, Ross Andrews. He said—

For us the blue card issue is important in terms of a lot of the big reforms that are happening around First Nations people—particularly the Voice to Parliament, the Path to Treaty, Closing the Gap, health equity and a few others—both at the state and national level, where First Nations people have to have a voice consistent with fellow Australians. For us, this issue is important in terms of economic engagement and participation.

Like the member for Hinchinbrook said, it is about having that economic participation, that opportunity like the rest of us. He continues—

Blue cards play a part in that as well in terms of getting our people off welfare and engaging in the real economy. There are challenges within the rules of government and how they play out, but there are also opportunities for our people to move forward on many of our challenges.

These are just three voices from the communities where that bill would apply. They are genuine voices who have asked for this bill time and time again. Now they are seeing it for a third time, and for a third time they will see it knocked back again. We will be left back at square one when this bill fails tonight.

This is not my bill. There has been criticism directed towards me in this House. People have said, 'You don't have all the answers.' Well, I don't. I know I don't have the answers. That why I go out there to ask people, 'How do we fix these things?' One of the reasons this bill is here is partly because one of the initial calls was from the Department of Education in Mount Isa. They said, 'Rob, can you fix the blooming blue card bill? As soon as we get someone good in Doomadgee we have to put them off. You need something that is fit for purpose.' We did not make this up: this came from the community. This is the voice coming out from those Aboriginal communities. This is not my idea, so you are not really criticising me when you say, 'You don't have all the good ideas.' I cannot see a better demonstration of how you give the voice to our first Australian people. This is about saying perhaps with our rigid guidelines we are not always in the best position to make a good judgement call on whether that person is fit for that job in that community.

Mr Dametto: It's pretty paternalistic.

Mr KATTER: It is paternalistic, to say the least. There is a trapdoor for a lot of speakers on this bill who are saying, 'We can't see a deterioration in the standards of this rural set,' so you must be accepting that the rules that would be applied by the local justice group, by the locals, would be of a lesser standard than we would apply. So you are saying they would care less about the safety of their kids than we would.

You could make criticism and say, 'Local justice groups don't have the support,' but you have got to pick someone. There was plenty of time for amendments. You could have picked the council or other groups, but no-one came up with any of those suggestions. You have just sat here and criticised the KAP bill. There have been nice things said about it but I have also heard, 'It just won't work.' Well, give me something that does work because there are some pretty big problems out there to fix. I do not think it will fix all of them, but this was a glaringly obvious one that has been sitting there for 10 years.

It is pretty frustrating when the same issue comes to my office 100 times, so we thought, 'Surely we can make this a bit better.' It does come with risks. Of course it does. Everything we do here comes with risks. The only way to remove the risk is to remove every kid out of the community, so that risk will never be removed. Guess what? A lot of these offences happened despite having the blue card. Waving it around the school or the hospital is not stopping some of the horrible things at the home. As Bravehearts has said, 90 or 95 per cent of what is happening there is happening in the home. Outside of kinship care, most of this debate becomes irrelevant. You keep defaulting to say that we must keep child safety sacrosanct. Who is going to disagree with that? Of course it is, but we have to make a call at some point. What is the cost on the other side of this debate? You will let these adults dwell in misery with no hope of getting a job just so you can sit back and say, 'But at least the kids are safe,' which I do not even think is a valid point.

It is very hard for me to reconcile this momentum built up by the government talking about the Voice and treaty and these are the pathways and we need to close the gap. I could not give a better working example of an issue that is sitting there that would close the gap right now and assist with that but everyone is walking away from it. Again, there are no amendments here from the government. There is nothing here to suggest that we look at the Ochre Card in the Northern Territory because that seems to be working okay. All we have is criticism that there are flaws in the bill. Maybe it does have flaws, but give me something that works then. The government has a lot of staff and a lot of smart people to work this out. I am sure we all care about this issue, and I am sure I do not have the mortgage on compassion for these communities. I am sure everyone here cares just as much as me. If you do, then crikey we have to do something here. There should be a sense of urgency, and if there is not, my goodness me, you are in the wrong job because this is a big issue and a big problem.

We have heard some pretty serious stories in this House, and I am not going to share all of them tonight. Some of them have come up already in some of the speeches. If members are saying that we should do nothing or that we should throw more money at it to get people to help them a bit more with applications, then they are completely removed from the process. That is a completely unrealistic solution. It helps—of course it helps—but it is so far from resolving this issue it is not funny. It really says to me that those people have not lived or worked enough with this issue.

I will go through a few cases. A lot of members of the public say, 'That's letting paedophiles get near kids.' This next example came up in a speech from a government member. Mornington Island had alcohol bans for eight or 10 years and the magistrates were just clogged up with home-brew offences, which ironically was the thing that disqualified you from getting your blue card. I have heard several times in this debate that we cannot have two sets of rules. Well, you already applied two sets of rules; you had alcohol bans. There are multiple examples.

The member for Hinchinbrook mentioned child safety. We had legislation in here that applied a separate standard for a First Australian family. If the child was from a dysfunctional family, they would extend the time they could remain in the care of a household. You are already recognising that there are some differences and nuances associated with different communities and you have changed the rules accordingly, but here you have defaulted back to that standard argument, which is a safe space, saying, 'We can't have two sets of rules.' That is nonsense. It has been done a lot and it is a silly argument to bring up.

I will give a few examples, and this is just a small sample of what I experience all of the time. I have permission from these people to mention these examples. The local mayor from Normanton rang me because the cultural support officer at the Gulf Christian College was declined a blue card. I rang the minister's office down here, which was very helpful. He had held that role successfully for many years without an issue, so this was devastating for him for personal reasons. He had picked himself up off a pretty low base. He was in the local school and the principal and staff loved having him around. His name is Daniel. They appreciated the work that he did. Six months passed after good help from the minister's office, which was really trying. The mayor, Jack Bowden, was so invested in trying to help this bloke. Daniel did receive his blue card after six to 12 months, but the principal got sick of doing the entire workload and he could not wait so they had to employ someone else. So Daniel loses and Normanton loses, but we all get to feel safe because we did not make any amendments to the blue card. We can avoid things like this.

Another example is Calvin Page in Doomadgee. He was so lost. He did not know that I was onto this issue already. He came and saw me and said, 'I just can't work it out. I'm trying to work here in Doomadgee.' The Pages are a big family in Mount Isa, and Marjad Page is a well-respected doctor up there from the same family. He was denied a blue card. The reasons were not well explained to him. He was of the understanding it was due to some minor offending that he had gone to court for before

and was due to receive a community service order for. He was unable to agree to community service as he worked out of town quite often. After a number of internal appeals, he never got his blue card. He was unable to stay and we lost Calvin Page. He was pleading for help.

This next one is an interesting one. I should qualify that this lady is in Charters Towers and my bill would not apply to Charters Towers, but I think it still speaks to the principle that we are trying to address. This Indigenous lady in Charters Towers had lost her job due to being rejected for a blue card. She had previously been working for 18 months at a local school as an Indigenous support officer for kids. She admitted she had fines and court appearances in the past; most were non-convictions and were dated. They were drug and assault charges. She attempted to appeal the decision through QCAT but was told she had to wait another two years to apply. The schools wanted her; everyone was happy with the job she was doing. She had successfully raised two of her own children and was now the legal carer of her niece. She said the blue card process made her feel constantly attacked so she threw in the towel. She said her life has gone downhill since she lost her job at the school and she is now suffering mentally and emotionally. That is probably putting a nice bent on it.

We can multiply that by hundreds of stories and I do not hear all of the stories. I am giving the House a small sample of what I encounter. I saw that selectability was one of the contributors on the bill. They are an employer up there. My usual conversation with any health providers, child safety workers and youth workers is, 'You're going to have a problem. You're not going to be able to engage the families because most of the people who have lived experience and are really good at working with these kids won't be able to get the job and you won't be able to give them the job mainly because of blue card.' It is not only because of blue card, but mainly because of it, so we need to solve the blue card problem. The lady from selectability did not know I had this bill in parliament, but she said to me, 'Can you do something? It's crazy. We're trying to employ these people in Doomadgee and Mornington and we can't get anyone. We can't do our job properly.' I thought, 'No kidding. Here's the number for the committee. Ring them and give them your submission. Tell them. I've heard it enough.'

There is just story after story of misery. Yes, there is risk with any solution that is given to these things. No solution would be perfect, as we have found out now. The blue card was done with the best of intentions. It was probably a good idea, but we are learning now that perhaps it has some flaws. Perhaps it has done more inadvertent damage than we set out to address in the first place. I will drill down on that because that is a really important concept I truly believe in.

If mum and dad in Doomadgee have missed out on that job right now, that barrier is too high. More money can be put into helping people to fill out the forms or whatever, but at that point when they decide, 'I'm going to engage. I'm going to advance myself and join the modern economy. I'm going to get a job,' that is a really important time in their life. They are ready to turn around and there needs to be a job ready and they need to be put in a place within a week. They need to get support.

The first comment they get is 'Crikey, we're having problems with your blue card. Don't worry though. We'll appeal it. It might take six to 12 months but just hang around and stay off the grog.' What is inevitably happening is that a lot of these people slip back into that dark place and the kids who we are trying to protect in the first place are at greater risk because mum and dad are still subject to these barriers. Meaningful work is their salvation. It is the one common denominator in just about every conversation I have with people appealing for help up there. They say, 'Why haven't we got the jobs? How come Save the Children got the jobs here? Why have all these out-of-town people got the jobs?'

Like Mislam Sam said in regards to the airport problem, everyone is flying in to do the jobs because the locals cannot get the jobs. If anyone else has a better solution, please share it now because this is not something where we kick the can down the road and say, 'Look, we will get to it.' The problem is there right now.

There are people dying. We heard the terribly distressing story of the girl from Mornington Island. I am sure there was not a person who listened to that in this House, and particularly when it was delivered in the committee hearing, who was not moved to tears. This is causing anguish. It is the height of well-intentioned bureaucracy getting in the road of the right outcomes. It does not matter if you are First Australian, non-Indigenous or whatever; the principle of this should be expanded beyond the Aboriginal communities. There should be some autonomy given beyond a tick-the-box authority here in Brisbane that allocates these blue cards. It must happen because it cannot continue to operate like this, and it is most acute in these Aboriginal communities.

In regards to schooling, Mislam Sam, the mayor of Palm Island, said, 'How are we supposed to encourage kids to go to school?' If mum and dad have had one or two chops at getting a job, they then say, 'Don't worry about that. Those white fellas won't give you the job because you don't have a blue

card.' They have had that conversation for five or 10 years now. A whole generation of kids has been built who say, 'Well, why would you bother? Why do you bother going to school?' There must be a correlation with that.

At my own political peril, people come into my office in Mount Isa and say, 'What are you doing about youth crime?' I say, 'You know what, the biggest thing I think I am doing is in regards to blue cards.' The reason the kids are running around the streets in Mount Isa is because they come from a dysfunctional family. What is the problem with the family unit? Invariably, mum and dad do not have a job. What is the problem with getting a job? It is not the only reason, but one of the biggest things you always find again and again—the one big common denominator—is blue cards. They are struggling. These are exactly the people we are trying to help, the ones you want to get off welfare and who are trying to have a go, and the first thing we give them is a barrier. We must change that. Every time we hit that point, we must think, as Mislam Sam said, 'You have to be brave and back these people.' That is what it takes. That is the whole issue of the Voice. If you want the Voice, you have to back these people and make a judgement call. Back it or do not say it at all; it means nothing.

There is risk associated with that. There is risk for the justice groups making these calls themselves. They could fall victim to one of the family groups in town who does not like the outcome of a decision, that is true, but we should all deal with this as a mature society. Everyone is going to have to deal with it at some point. We have to come back to the point that we need to bring these people forward. We have to remove the barriers to the jobs because meaningful work will be their salvation. If you want to fix youth crime, fix the families. If you want to fix the families, get them into jobs. They do not want money. When I go to Doomadgee, they do not say, 'Hey, give me more handouts. Give me more money.' They will not say that. They say, 'How come the white fella has got the job? How come we haven't got that here?' Most of the time the reason is blue cards.

Here we are tonight with an opportunity to fix that. Again, we do not have all the answers—we are not the smartest guys in the room—but we have something. I will guess that there are no amendments coming. There will be no alternatives. There will be no announcements from government tomorrow saying, 'We will overhaul the system.' There may be a statement of, 'We are going to add some more cultural awareness officers in Doomadgee to help with the processing that is happening.' Probably forget it. It is hard enough to try to get people out there now to engage in those spaces. It might help a bit; I probably should not say 'forget it.' But it breaks your heart. We need a really big change. We need the government to be bold to back these people. However it does not look like that is going to happen.

I started sharing this story in my original contribution, but the ridiculous impact of the blue cards was brought up earlier. It does not really relate to the bill, but it does explain the point in regards to the rural fires. We had 400 rural fires leave the service because of blue cards. Do you need any better evidence? I do not think that they were abusers. I bet 90 per cent of them were saying, 'You know what? Stuff that. If you are going to make me get a blue card, I'm out. I am not going to run around chasing kids while I'm fighting fires.'

Ms Boyd interjected.

Mr KATTER: I will take that interjection from the member for Pine Rivers saying they are predators. I would love you to go and take a sample—

Ms Boyd: I didn't say that.

Mr KATTER: Perhaps I misheard it, but you would have to say that that would be the insinuation of some because I have heard people say, 'It was a good result. We got rid of 400 threats to children.' I would not see it that way. Most reasonable people would think that that is probably a bad outcome; that is a bit of overreach from a policy that is not fit for purpose.

I shared a story in the last sitting week about Indigenous rangers. I sat next to a bloke on a plane who said, 'Mate, blue cards!' I always get the same reaction: they shake their heads and say, 'Blue cards—don't start me on that.' He said, 'I had two young blokes I got off the street to get them working, but we had to get them a fire safety certificate which meant they needed a blue card.' These guys are working in the most remote parts of the Queensland bush, yet they need a blue card. So guess what? They do not have a job now. They could not get the blue card. Congratulations! We are keeping kids safe by rangers not getting their blue cards.

These are the inadvertent effects that we are not addressing. That is the real regret of what is happening here tonight. We believe in trying to fix real problems and real solutions, not words, not nebulous type concepts that are going to somehow get these people out of a situation and address those horrible statistics I gave on Doomadgee. These are aspirational people. They want a job. They want a house. There is a racial pay gap here. In Doomadgee, the average annual income is \$63,000.

You try to live off that when you are paying 600 bucks a week for groceries. No wonder they are angry. No wonder their kids are angry and coming to Mount Isa and playing up. They are angry because we are not backing them. Here is an opportunity to back them. Go and talk to the mayors. I challenge any member to go and ring a mayor anywhere through the cape or the gulf to argue with the concept here. If you want to argue semantics then put an amendment in or come back tomorrow if you are the government and reintroduce it. Suspend standing orders. Bring something back in which fixes this. I would love to support it. I could not care less if it does not have KAP's name on it; this is much greater than politics.

I do not think there would be too many more important priorities we have in this state than addressing the horrible things afflicting these people. They are getting angrier and angrier because we are not backing them. We can all sit here and feel safe in ourselves and say, 'That is right, we have a good rigorous regime to protect kids.' I am not sure we are protecting the kids any better. Again, I will argue that if you can get mum and dad into work, you have a much better chance of keeping those kids safe in Doomadgee. If you can get them into work and off the grog and off the drugs, you will have a much better chance—a much better chance than any blue card being waved around at the school or the hospital at the moment, or, if I want to make light of it, waving around the sewage plant in Kowanyama. The sewage plant operator in Kowanyama needed a blue card—that is really important.

Where is the benefit? Perhaps there is some small, marginal benefit at the moment with keeping it as it is in terms of child safety where the card will apply, but I think that is well offset. We are heavily discounting and ignoring the amazing benefit of empowering these people in the modern economy. That is such a big thing.

In closing, I ask people to really consider how they vote on this. It is a good opportunity. It is just going to keep coming back to the House if it is not done tonight. You are going to have to address this at some point because the problem is not going away. You can tinker around the edges and say whatever you want, talking your way through the media saying, 'We have this wonderful new policy that does it,' but unless you are going to tackle this problem head on and address it warts and all with the risks that go along with it, unless you are willing to really back and live what you are saying about giving these people a voice, if you want a manifestation of that principle to be put into policy, I cannot see how you can vote against this. Otherwise, I fear you are deeply hypocritical. With that, I respectfully put it to the House and ask you to support the bill.